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SUBJECT: UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: BILATERAL
PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION INACTIVE

Classified By: Ambassador William Taylor. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) Reflecting the poor state of bilateral ties beyond the natural gas crisis, the Russia-Ukraine presidential commission charged with coordinating the overall relationship and resolving disputes has been inactive since the August Georgia-Russia conflict. Russia refuses to engage with Ukraine on key issues, such as any planning for removal of the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol, despite the GOU's announcement that Russia must withdraw by 2017. A Yushchenko initiative to invigorate Russia policy through establishment of an "Interagency Strategic Group" among Ukrainian Ministries has, to date, had no impact. End Summary.

Presidential Commission Inactive

2. (C) Embassy met with Volodimir Ivanov, acting Director General for Foreign Affairs at the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council (NSDC). Ivanov noted that the Ukraine-Russia Presidential Commission, established in 2005, had not met since the August 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict. The entire structure, involving a range of working groups and sub-groups on security, economic, political and other issues, is inactive. Ivanov speculated that the Kremlin, having given up on Yushchenko, may be avoiding engagement until a more Moscow-friendly leadership emerges in Kyiv.

GOU Forms "Interagency Strategic Group"

3. (SBU) Ivanov pointed out that in order to demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to improving the bilateral relationship, Yushchenko announced December 1 the creation of a new Ukrainian "Interagency Strategic Group." Its task is to energize the GOU interagency to make the Bilateral Commission process productive and to begin tackling the substantial backlog of issues that have languished in the various sub-commissions.

4. (SBU) Headed by National Security and Defense Council Secretary Raysa Bohatryeva, the GOU Interagency Strategic Group includes the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Finance; the heads of the intelligence services; the head of Naftohaz (the state gas monopoly); and the Industrial Policy Minister. Konstantin Gryshchenko, Ukraine's Ambassador to Russia (who serves concurrently as First Deputy Secretary of the NSDC) serves as deputy chairman. In announcing the Group's formation, Bohatryeva said that the GOU sought to get beyond the pattern of tit-for-tat accusatory statements coming from each country's Foreign Ministry and seek "constructive interaction" at all levels.

5. (C) Ivanov noted that Russian observers had greeted the

creation of the GOU internal coordinating group with skepticism, calling it window dressing. He admitted that there is no specific Bilateral Commission meeting toward which the group would initially be working. Reflecting on the possible role of the Russian Ambassador to Ukraine, Ivanov noted that Chernomyrdin is getting on in years and that his interest has mainly been in economic and trade issues, in particular, natural gas. Ivanov did not foresee much of a role for Chernomyrdin.

Black Sea Fleet

¶16. (C) Ivanov lamented that the GOR refused to discuss key bilateral issues, such as modalities for the withdrawal of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in 2017. He said that Russia continues to ignore fleet movement notification procedures imposed in July 2008, which were reiterated in August by presidential decree, and then again in the autumn by the Cabinet of Ministers. Ivanov hoped the GOU Interagency Strategic Group would be able to elevate this issue to a higher level in the Bilateral Commission, where it currently falls under a subcommittee.

Russian Identity Documents

¶17. (C) Ivanov said that the issue, as reported in the press, of Moscow issuing special identity cards which would qualify citizens of the Former Soviet Union for residency, work, and educational benefits in Russia was something to watch. The question of ambiguous or dual nationality is an issue for Ukraine with a number of other countries, including Poland

and Romania, but has special significance with Russia. He recalled an earlier Russian "technopark initiative" that provided incentives to attract young specialists and scientists to relocate to Russia. Ukraine would monitor the development of the identity cards. That said, Ivanov observed that reports that Russia had been recently issuing large numbers of passports to Ukrainians were exaggerated. There are many Russian passport holders, but most got their passports in the 1990s.

Medvedev's Security Initiative and post-START

¶18. (C) Russia and Ukraine are also at odds on Security Architecture, Ivanov noted. Ivanov said he had few details on Medvedev's concept; what little he did know about it, he did not like. The goal for Ukraine in the post-Georgia environment, he said, is to clarify the nature of its security guarantees. The 1994 Trilateral US-Russia-Ukraine Agreement and the broader Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances were linked to START and Ukraine's decision to give up nuclear weapons. In a post-START environment, Ivanov said, a new trilateral (perhaps multilateral) document is needed with new commitments and guarantees. He noted that the 2008 Georgia events plus slower momentum on MAP leaves Ukraine with "much to think about" on security.

Comment

¶19. (C) While our conversation with Ivanov preceded the current natural gas crisis, his comments reflect the overall disconnect between the two sides that characterizes the gas issue. Ivanov seemed to be of the view that Russia has written off Yushchenko and put any interest in improving relations with Ukraine on ice until Ukraine can present a more amenable (pro-Kremlin) partner.

TAYLOR